

Not Wrath, But Rapture

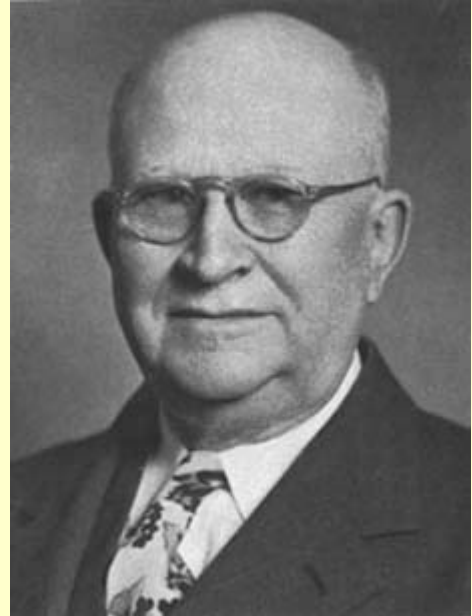
By Dr. Harry Ironside (1876-1951)

What Is Meant by the Term "The Great Tribulation"?

The careful student of the prophetic scriptures cannot fail to observe that in both the Old and New Testaments the Spirit of God speaks of a trial involving the pouring out of divine wrath on men.

This is known as...

....*"the great tribulation,"*
*"the time of Jacob's trouble,"*
*"the coming hour of temptation,"*
*"the day of the Lord," and other terms.*



This specific period of judgment is clearly distinguished from the ordinary trials and tribulations to which the people of God have been subjected in all dispensations, and which are promised to the church of God at the present time. *"In the world,"* said our Blessed Lord, *"ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world."* *"We must,"* declared the apostle Paul, *"through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God."* Speaking for all saints, Paul could say, *"We glory in tribulation."*

So long as Satan is the god of this world and believers are on this earth. there will be trial and tribulation to face. This arises from the very nature of things. The world is opposed to everything that is of the Spirit of God. The Christian's trials arise from the adverse circumstances through which he is passing, like Israel of old journeying through the wilderness. More than this, there is the direct opposition of the enemy: *"All they that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."* But there is one character of tribulation that God's children in this age will never have to know, and that is exposure to divine wrath.

"God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

We look for His return as our deliverer from the coming wrath. This is a principle of great importance when it comes to defining the church's relationship to the great tribulation, when the vials of wrath will be poured out on guilty Christendom and apostate Judaism.

Many have taught in the past, and some still teach, that the Old Testament passages referring to the great tribulation were all fulfilled in the days of Israel's sufferings under the nations, after the fall of Jerusalem, particularly in the era of Antiochus Epiphanes, who is sometimes called the Old Testament antichrist. But a careful examination of the scriptures of the prophets having to do with this time of trial, and a comparison of these

with New Testament declarations, make this position absolutely untenable. Others have supposed that the great tribulation referred either to the days of persecution under pagan emperors of Rome for two bloody centuries, following the death of the apostle Paul, or perhaps the even more fearful persecutions under the papacy during the dark ages. But there are very definite statements made by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself that positively negate any such view and make it evident that this solemn period of judgment is still in the future. Will the church of God or any part of it go into or pass through this day of grief and sorrow? In order to answer this question correctly, it will be necessary first of all to consider carefully a number of scriptures indicating the nature of and the time for the great tribulation.

The first scripture that definitely speaks of this era is **Deuteronomy 4:26-31**. This is part of the message that Moses gave to Israel on the plains of Moab before they entered the land of Canaan, shortly before their great leader resigned his responsibility and went up into Mount Nebo to be put to sleep by God until the day of the Lord's coming. He said to the people, as he warned them of the folly of departure from God:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that ye shall soon utterly perish from off the land whereunto ye go over Jordan to possess it; ye shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall utterly be destroyed. And the Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the heathen, whither the Lord shall lead you.

These words have been literally fulfilled. For many centuries Israel has been scattered among the nations, and even though many of them have recently returned to Palestine, the day of their dispersion is not yet ended. This scattering was because of their sin and their violation of God's holy law. In **verses 28 and 29** Moses continued, saying:

And there ye shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. But if from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul.

This last verse has not yet been fulfilled. Evidently it does not refer to the return from Babylon. It has to do with the final repentance of the nation when they will be brought back from among all the nations on the earth. The scattering referred to was not simply that which took place in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, but rather the worldwide dispersion following the destruction of Jerusalem forty years after the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Never since that day have the people of Israel turned whole-heartedly to God. Consequently they have not yet been restored to their land. The present movement is not a return to God but simply a natural awakening, leading many to go back to Palestine while still in unbelief. Such a return is elsewhere predicted in scripture, but is not what is referred to here. The circumstances that will result in the repentance of the nation are indicated in the verses that follow:

When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the Lord thy God, and shalt be obedient unto his voice: **(For the Lord thy God is a merciful God:)** he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers, which he sware unto them **(4:30-31)**.

We have here the first definite mention of the coming tribulation. Certainly **verse 30** does not refer to the age-long sorrows through which the people of Israel have passed, but to a definite set period of tribulation in "the latter days." This term, as any student

of prophecy knows, refers to the closing days of God's dealings with this nation before they will be restored to Himself.

There are no other clear references to this same period until we come to the book of Psalms. Many of these psalms give us experiences that Israel will be called to pass through in that time of distress and show us what the glorious outcome will be. Space does not permit dwelling on the **testimony of the Psalms**. Let us pass on to the prophets.

There are many passages that we might quote from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Let us consider two. In **Isaiah 13:6-13** we have a graphic description of the day of the Lord's indignation.

Howl ye: for the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty. Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt: and they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them: they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another: their faces shall be as flames. Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and He shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. And it will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity: and I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. I will make a man more precious than fine gold: even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir. Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.

The phrase "the land" means, as it does throughout all the prophets, the land of Palestine or the home of God's earthly people. **"He shall destroy the sinners out of it"**: this will be one result of the tribulation the nation will go through. The apostates will be destroyed but a remnant will turn to the Lord. Notice that there are certain supernatural events which must take place at that time, affecting, as our Lord himself later indicated, the stars of heaven and the constellations. The darkening of the sun and the shrouding of the moon are here definitely predicted. Keep these things in mind as we shall come across them again. Not only will the people of Israel be punished in that day, but the judgments will fall on the world because of pride and arrogance. These verses provide a most vivid description of the end of our boasted civilization, when God is left out. They show us what this present evil world is hastening toward. They tell us what apostate Israel will have to endure and what unbelieving gentiles will be obliged to go through.

We may get a little idea of at least part of the meaning of this prophecy if we remember what happened to the great empire of Russia. How little there was of God for many years, and how corrupt and false the professing church. Evangelicals were terrible persecuted. Pride and arrogance prevailed, until God overthrew the ancient regime and permitted the awful conditions that have succeeded it, as if in answer to the sin and corruption of those who professed to own his name. His people have suffered dreadfully in that tribulation. But the wrath of God has not been poured out, nor have the saints known divine indignation.

Turn now to **Isaiah 17:4-11**:

And in that day it shall come to pass, that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean....that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel. And he shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands, neither shall respect that which his fingers have made, either the groves, or the images. In that day shall his strong cities be as a forsaken bough, and an uppermost branch which they left because of the children of Israel: and there shall be desolation. Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips, In the day shalt thou make thy plants to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow.

In verses 4-7 we see the remnant of Israel in the latter days, and in **verses 8-10** we see the conditions that will prevail in the land of Palestine. Already we see everything working up towards this. Notice the striking prophecy of **verse 10**, where God told the people that because of their long years of rebellion against him, their land shall be denuded of tress, that just prior to the day of their great tribulation they shall plant that land with pleasant plants and shall set it with strange slips. It is a remarkable fact that in recent years many millions of plants and slips have been imported into and planted in the soil of Palestine. At the present moment the Jewish leaders are congratulating themselves that the day of their long trial is almost ended, and that their ancient patrimony will soon be again a land flowing with milk and honey.

God has said,

"In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and desperate sorrow."

Whose grief and whose desperate sorrow will this be? The answer to this question will settle the problem that is before us. In this passage God was speaking of Israel's apostasy and His dealings with them. When our blessed Lord was on the earth, Palestine was one of the most fruitful of lands. Josephus's account of the conditions prevailing in Galilee before the siege of Jerusalem is almost unbelievable, so productive was that land and so thickly populated. But they did not know the time of their visitation, and when the Saviour was rejected as Messiah and His authority refused, God rejected the people and cast them out and blasted their land. Since then Palestine has been like a great desert, with here and there an oasis, unable to support a large population. The climate of that country has also been changed, chiefly because of the fact the large forests on the Lebanon mountains have been destroyed.

The Turkish government has only helped the desolation. The Turk never planted a tree where he cut one down, and in the last hundred years of his rule he put a tax on trees, which was so exorbitant that the people found it cheaper to cut down their orchards and groves than to pay this tax. But ever since World War I they have been busy planting the land with pleasant plants and setting it with strange slips. If we did not have the word of prophecy we might take it for granted that the new day of Israel's final blessing is dawning. But as we study what God has revealed, our hearts might well bleed as we realize, what these poor Jews are going back to. How little they understand that this, their hour of tribulation, is still in the future. How little they realize that they must pass through it before they recognize the Messiah their fathers rejected.

Now let us turn to the **prophet Jeremiah**:

And these are the words that the Lord spake concerning Israel and concerning Judah. For thus saith the Lord: We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear, and not of peace. Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child? wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness? Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it; it is even the time of **JACOB'S TROUBLE**: but he shall be saved out of it. For it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, and will burst thy bonds, and strangers shall no more serve themselves of him: But they shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them (**30:4-9**).

Reading this chapter carefully and the one that follows will give us many more particulars in regard to the subject that is before us. What I particularly wish to stress here is the different name now given to the era of tribulation. It is called specifically "**the time of Jacob's Trouble**," and it is important that we have this clearly in mind. **IT IS NOT THE TIME OF THE CHURCH'S TROUBLE**. As we have seen, we are having our time of trouble now. We have been enduring tribulation ever since the beginning of the church's testimony here on earth. But the passage before us refers to something very different, a time of unprecedented distress that is called "**Jacob's Trouble**." If Christian students of the scriptures would always distinguish carefully what prophecy has to say concerning the Jew, the gentile, and the church of God, it would not be difficult to clear up this entire subject. It is by confusing these three distinct classes that many unscriptural theories are foisted on the people of God.

Observe that the time of Jacob's trouble is to be immediately followed by the repentance of the remnant and their deliverance from gentile oppression, when once more they will serve the Lord their God. The true Son of David will be recognized as their Messiah and will be seated on David's throne: David means "beloved." and God the Father has already designated the Lord Jesus Christ as His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased. He was refused as the Son of David when He came in grace the first time. He will be received in that very character when He returns in power and glory.

There are many passages that we might quote from the book of Ezekiel. Let us consider **Ezekiel 20:33-38**:

As I live, saith the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you: and I will bring you out from the people, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out. And I will bring you into the wilderness of the people, and there will I plead with you face to face. Like as I pleaded with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I plead with you, saith the Lord God. And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant: And I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against me: I will bring them forth out of the country where they sojourn, and they shall not enter into the land of Israel: and ye shall know that I am the Lord.

Note carefully that here too this time of divine fury poured out on the people is to be Israel's culminating experience immediately preceding their restoration to the Lord, when He will purge from among them the rebels and those that transgress, and will bring the redeemed remnant out of the lands of the gentiles into their own country, revealing Himself to them as the Shepherd of Israel. By no possible system of sound exegesis can

these experiences be made to refer to the church of God. The Lord tells us why He will permit this time of trouble. It is to be a judgment on those in Israel who rebel against Him. It will be the time when he will separate the remnant from the rebels. He will cause that remnant to pass under the Shepherd's rod and will acknowledge them as His own flock.

The book of Daniel is the great prophecy of the times of the gentiles and gives us Israel's experiences under the domination of the nations. One could pause over many passages, but we draw attention particularly to Daniel 12:1-4:

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament: and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.

In **Daniel 11** God gave us a remarkable picture of his dealings with the nations, from the overthrow of the Persian empire right on to the time of the end immediately preceding the Messiah's second coming. In that day Israel will be passing through a time of trouble such as never was. But what will the result be? God said,

"Thy people, [that is, Daniel's people, the Jews] shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book."

or those who are regenerated. For centuries they have been sleeping in the dust of the earth. Some take this literally, but it actually refers to their present condition as scattered among the gentiles. But in this time of trouble some, referring to the remnant, shall awake to everlasting life, and some, referring to the apostate, shall awake to shame and everlasting contempt. This era of trouble is to prevail until the Endtime. Evidently the Spirit of God has in view that particular period spoken of by Moses as the tribulation of the latter days.

The minor prophets abound with awesome descriptions of this same day of distress, but we must content ourselves with two more Old Testament quotations. Notice **Joel 3:9-11**:

Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles: Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up: Beat your plowshares to swords, and your pruninghooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong. Assemble yourselves, and come, all ye heathen, and gather yourselves together round about: thither cause thy mighty ones to come down, O Lord.

This is the call of God to the heathen to come up into the land of Palestine for the great conflict of the latter days when Israel will be back in the land in unbelief. The fearful wars of that time will go on until the Lord Himself descends with a host, designated here as "thy mighty ones," Who are these mighty ones? If we had nothing else to guide us, we might think of them as angels. Undoubtedly angels will be in His train, as many scriptures show. But we shall see as we go on that these mighty ones are the saints of

the past and present dispensations, who shall have been caught up to be with the Lord and glorified before the great tribulation begins.

Zechariah in his last chapter described the great Armageddon gathering, and told of the last siege of Jerusalem immediately preceding the Lord's return:

Behold, the day of the Lord cometh... Then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle. And His feet shall stand that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the ... north, and half of it toward the south (14:1-4).

Here we have a wonderful description of the appearing of our Lord. This proves that the great tribulation does not refer to any past experiences which the Jews have gone through, not yet to any experiences the church has suffered, but to that time of Jacob's trouble which immediately precedes the revelation of Jesus Christ from heaven to set up his kingdom and reign over all the earth in righteousness.

From the Old Testament, we have learned that the tribulation will take place in the latter days of Israel's history. The people who will feel it most will be the Jews, but all the apostate nations of the gentiles will also share the afflictions. It will not be a time of mere providential judgments but a time when there will be terrific and startling signs in the heavens and on earth, and men will be obliged to acknowledge that God Himself is dealing with them in His wrath and great indignation. All past tribulations have been merely natural and providential.

But this time of trouble will be characterized by supernatural events that will add to the horrors under which men will live, so that they will desire to die, and death shall flee from them. We have also seen that this tribulation goes right on to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ with His mighty ones to rule with the rod of iron. During the trial, a remnant of Israel will be separated from the apostate part of the nation and will turn in repentance to the Lord and be led to recognize Him when He comes. This remnant He will own as the true Israel and in them **"all Israel shall be saved."** They will be the handful of corn on the top of the mountains, the gleanings of the olives on the topmost bough, that will eventually **"blossom and bud and fill the place of the whole earth with fruit."**

Now let us turn to the New Testament and see if we can get any further light on this day of grief and desperate sorrow. Look first at **Matthew 24**. In this portion of the kingdom gospel, our Lord portrayed the conditions that will prevail on earth right up to his second coming. He did not, however, speak definitely of the church, which is His body, or of any testimony such as we now know. This great prophecy was given before the revelation of the mystery and it is in keeping with the older predictions. Our Lord revealed to us the conditions that will prevail in the land of Palestine where there will be a remnant who cleave to him and love His name immediately preceding His second coming. In **verse 15** He indicated the beginning of a time of special trial **"when ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place."** This carries us back to **Daniel 12**, and is clearly the starting point of the great tribulation, which He described in **Matthew 24:16-29**:

Then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains: Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house: Neither let him which is in

the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day: For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened. Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there, believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders: insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert: go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers: believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west: so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For wheresoever the carcase is, there will be eagles be gathered together. Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.

Note particularly that all of this is Jewish, and all refers to the land of Palestine, except as the gentile nations are linked with the conflict of that day. Here we have the definite name given by the Lord Himself to this period of trial, **"the great tribulation."** That it is exactly the same period spoken of by the prophets from Moses to Malachi is clear in the verses that follow, taken from **Matthew 24:30-32**, where we read:

And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

This makes it plain that the great tribulation has never taken place in the past, either in connection with Israel's experiences or those of the church. It could not refer to Israel's sufferings under Antiochus Epiphanes, for our Lord spoke of it as in the future. It cannot refer to their sufferings in the days of Titus and Vespasian, for those experiences did not culminate in the return of the Son of God. Neither can it by any possibility be fitted into the experiences of the church, either in the days of the pagan emperors or the papal persecution, for both of these are long since in the past and the Son of man has not yet returned. His coming will definitely put an end to the great tribulation. We can only conclude therefore that it is still in the future and the scriptures we have considered show that it has to do with the future of Israel, not of the church.

WILL SAINTS BE KEPT FROM THE COMING HOUR OF TEMPTATION?

Let us compare the testimony given in Matthew's gospel with the records of both Mark and Luke.

In **Mark 13:14-27** we have a passage almost parallel to the one in Matthew, a careful reading of which only confirms what we have already seen, namely, that the great tribulation is still in the future, and that it ends with the Son of man coming in the clouds with power and great glory.

In **Luke 21** it is evident that considerable time must elapse between the overthrow of Jerusalem under Titus and this coming of the Son of man, Jerusalem's destruction is

predicted in **verses 20-24:**

And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judea flee to the mountains: and let them which are in the midst of it depart out: and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.

Notice particularly that following the downfall of the holy city and the desolation of Palestine, Jerusalem's treading down or subjection to the nations is to last until the times of the gentiles is fulfilled. This expression, "**the times of the Gentiles**," is not used anywhere else in scripture, though a similar term is found in **Ezekiel 30:3**: "**For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near, a cloudy day: it shall be the time of the heathen.**" The heathen are the gentiles. Ezekiel is referring there to the triumph of Nebuchadnezzar over Israel and the powers to which they turn for help. Egypt and Ethiopia.

The times of the gentiles began with Nebuchadnezzar. They go on until the return of the Son of man. Who will come as the Stone that smites the feet of the image of gentile supremacy, breaking it to pieces and scattering the dust to the four winds of the earth, then becoming a great mountain and filling the whole world. The actual circumstances immediately preceding this coming are given in **Luke 21:25-27**:

And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars: and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring: Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

The signs referred to here are the supernatural events that we have already seen will take place during the great tribulation, while the conditions set forth in verse 26 show us the effects of these things in the hearts of humankind. This period of tribulation culminates in the shaking of the powers of heaven. Then the Son of man will be seen descending in a cloud to take His kingdom and reign in righteousness.

A careful consideration of many scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament prophets, would show us that when the Lord thus returns, He will smite apostate Israel and the rebellious gentile world with judgment. They will be destroyed at His presence. On the other hand, a remnant of Israel will not only be spared from judgment, but will welcome Him as their long-looked-for King and Messiah. A great multitude of gentiles will be saved from the wrath that will fall on the worshippers of the beast and will form the nucleus of our Lord's kingdom on this earth for a thousand years. This is the predicted program for the coming of the Son of man.

The term "**the coming of the Son of man**" never refers to that particular aspect of the second advent for which the church is taught to look. When our Lord addressed Israel when He was on this earth He used this expression over and over again. In John 14 our Lord announced an aspect of His return that is NOT depicted in the synoptics. He spoke

of coming to receive His own to be with Himself. This is the first clear word we have in the New Testament regarding what is commonly called the rapture. This particular aspect is always distinguished from the coming of the Son of man.

With the above facts in mind, let us now turn to **Revelation 3:10- 11**. Writing to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, our Lord said:

"Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I will also keep thee from the hour of temptation [of trial], which shall come upon all the world [habitable earth], to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown."

These letters to the seven churches set forth **"the things which are,"** that is, the conditions prevailing in the professing church of God on earth throughout the present dispensation. Until our Lord returns, churches will be found in the moral and spiritual condition of those depicted here. These seven letters set forth the characteristic features of seven distinct periods of church history from apostolic days until the end of her testimony in this scene. The warnings and exhortations and promises in these seven letters are for all the church of God throughout the dispensation. Addressing those who are shown to be genuine, who have kept Christ's word and not denied His name, which is the least that could be said of any true believer; we have this definite promise that such will be kept from the coming hour of trial, which is to fall on the entire habitable earth.

The term **"habitable earth"** is a translation of the Greek word *oikoumene*, which was used in apostolic days to distinguish that part of the world which was in subjection to the Roman empire and which is the proper sphere of prophecy, from all the rest of the world whose inhabitants were called barbarians. It is on this Roman earth that the vials of divine wrath will be poured out in all their intensity in the days of the great tribulation. Those who will be particularly exposed to these judgments are distinguished as **"dwellers on the earth."** This expression is used again and again in Revelation. A careful consideration of every passage in which it is found will make it plain that it refers not simply to people who live on this globe, but to those who have despised the heavenly calling and whose hopes and affections are all centered on this earth. In other words, they are the same as those spoken of in **Philippians 3**, who have spurned the heavenly calling and who **"mind earthly things."**

This promise expressly declares that real believers of this dispensation, that is, the true church, will be kept from this coming hour of trial. They have not been kept from the frequent trials and tribulations to which Christians throughout the past centuries have been exposed, but they will be kept from this particular hour.

It is evident that the Spirit of God in so speaking was using a term which Christians generally were expected to understand. If any ask, ***"What is the hour of temptation or trial, coming on the entire earth, from which we shall be kept?"*** the hour of temptation is that hour of trial so frequently spoken of elsewhere in scripture. We have seen something of what the Old Testament and also the four gospels have to say concerning it. Let us consider references to the hour of temptation in the epistles.

First Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters that the Spirit of God preserved for the edification of the church. In this letter the second coming of Christ was presented as the imminent hope of the saints. No one can read the latter part of **chapter 4** thoughtfully

without seeing that the Spirit of God intended the church to live in the daily expectation of our Lord's return. No one can possibly live in the daily expectation of the coming of the Son of man as set forth in the synoptic gospels unless he knows that he is in the very closing days of the great tribulation. Consequently, the hope of the Lord's return set forth in Thessalonians must of necessity be a different thing to the expectation of His coming to set up His kingdom, and careful consideration of the passage referred to only serves to make this clearer. It is the Lord's coming for His saints whereas the other is His coming with them.

In **chapter 1** in this epistle, Paul spoke of the conversion of the Thessalonians, and the testimony they were giving to the world outside, and he said:

"For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come". (1:9-10).

The last clause, it is generally conceded, does not exactly represent what the apostle wrote.

The **Revised Standard Version** translates it, *"Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."*

J.N. Darby rendered it, *"Jesus, our Deliverer from the coming wrath,"*

Dr. Young was very explicit: he translated it, *"Jesus who is rescuing us from the anger that is coming."*

The point is that it is not simply that we are looking for our Lord as the One Who has delivered us from eternal wrath, but we look for him as the one who is coming to snatch us away from the wrath that is soon to all on earth. This agrees with the promise in **Revelation 3:10**. And it is in this way that the church will be kept from that hour of trial. Before the judgements fall the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven with a shout, the dead in Christ will be raised, and the living saints changed, and we shall be snatched away, caught up to be with Him before the indignation is poured out on this guilty scene.

Turn now to **2 Thessalonians 2**. As we read it carefully, let us bear in mind what has already been before us. In order to see the viewpoint both of the apostle himself and of those to whom he was writing at that particular time, it will be well to consider certain facts that may be clearly deduced from a careful study of the entire letter. It is evident that the coming of the Lord had a large place in the hearts and minds of these particular saints. Some among them had become unbalanced on the subject, and were teaching that they were already entering into the time of great tribulation. They believed that the day of the Lord was practically upon them. They were endeavoring to substantiate this teaching by the use of a forged letter purporting to come from the apostle Paul, and the advocates of this system declared that the Spirit had revealed these things to them. Therefore the saints were becoming unsettled, losing the blessedness of the hope of the Lord's return for His own. They feared they were already entering the great tribulation, and that the next event would be the coming of the Son of man.

Notice carefully **verses 1 and 2**:

"Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto Him. That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand."

The Revised Standard Version reads, ***"To the effect that the day of the Lord is just at hand."*** The best manuscript authority authenticates this. The day of Christ is not the same thing as the day of the Lord. The day of Christ refers to the time when believers will stand in their glorified bodies at Christ's judgment seat. But the day of the Lord is the time when His judgements will be poured out on the earth, and He will descend and take the kingdom. The apostle reminded these believers of what he had already written in his previous epistle. They were not to look for the day of the Lord but for the return of our Saviour to deliver them from the coming wrath. So he pleaded with them in view of these facts, that ***"by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and by our gathering together unto Him,"*** we are not to be troubled or distressed, no matter what assertions others might make in regard to the day of trouble being already on us. The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together unto Him must take place before that time of distress can begin. This is exactly what we insist on today, we who do not believe that the church will go through the great tribulation. Our daily expectation is the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together unto Him. This must precede the judgments. The day of the Lord cannot begin until after it takes place.

Suppose that a great city is in rebellion against its rightful sovereign, but there are in that city certain loyalists who who grieve over the defection of the rest, and are faithful to their king. Word comes that the offended monarch and his great army are on the way to the city to subdue or destroy it. Naturally the loyal citizens are anxious and troubled. They do not want to be exposed to the fire of the royal army and they manage to get word out to the king declaring their loyalty and asking his consideration. Word comes back that his standard will be planted on a certain mountain outside the city before the bombardment begins. When that standard is seen on the mountain, all the loyalists are instructed to leave the city under protection of the king, who will make special arrangements to guard them from destruction,. Soon the van of the army appears. More and more troops arrive and surround the doomed city. Great guns are being placed at advantageous points on the outlying hills and all preparations for the shelling of the city are being made. Rumours of all sorts are being circulated. The bombing is to begin tonight, or tomorrow, or the next day. The loyalists are becoming nervous and anxious, but in some way a message reaches them. ***"I beseech you my the coming of the king, the lifting up of the standard on the mountain, and your gathering together unto him, be not troubled because of what you see in the way of preparation."*** The messenger assures them that not one shell will fall on the city until they are safely gathered unto him outside the wall. And so their hearts are quieted.

One day the standard is uplifted. A regiment of cavalry comes careering over the plain, and at the same moment the loyalists, acting by preconcerted arrangement, leave the city and are immediately protected by the royal horsemen. Soon they gather about the king, prostrating themselves at his feet and attesting their faithfulness. Then the attack on the city begins.

Like all human illustrations, I realize this one does not fully picture the conditions that are to prevail at the Lord's return, but it may at least help to make clear what the apostle means in these opening verses, and it will prepare us to understand what follows: ***"Let no man deceive you by any means for that day shall not come except there come a falling away [the apostasy] first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition."*** The ***"day"*** is the day of trial and distress that we have been occupied with, but it will not come until the apostasy is fully manifest. There cannot be complete apostasy so long as the church of God is in this world. No matter how much there may be in the way of unfaithfulness to Christ and His truth, our Lord has declared,

"Upon this rock will I build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." As long as the church is in the word, it is being led in His triumph. There may be individual apostates, but there cannot be complete apostasy.

But when the church has been caught up to be with Christ, then the apostasy in all its fullness will arrive. Out of that condition of things the son of perdition will arise, ***"who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped: so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God."*** This is the sinister character whose awful features are dimly seen in both Testaments as one of the dominant actors in the last days. While not for one moment condoning the abomination of the papacy, it is not logically possible to link this personage with that system as a whole, nor with any individual pope of the past or present. The popes at their worst have all professed to act as vicars of Christ. They have not exalted themselves above all that is called God or that is worshipped. But the man of sin will be an absolutely self-deified atheist. He will recognize no God but himself. His rise to power is evidently linked with the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place, spoken of by Daniel and referred to by our Lord as the true starting point of the great tribulation.

In **2 Thessalonians 2:6-10** we are told of one who hinders this full manifestation of evil until the set time appointed of God.

And now ye know what withholdeth [hinders] that he might be revealed in His [own] time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only He who now letteth [hinders] will let [hinder] until He be taken out of the way. And then shall that ***"Wicked"*** [one] be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming. Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders. And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

There has been a great deal of controversy about this passage. Some claim that the hinderer is Satan who has his place in the heavens until after the rapture of the church, and then he shall be taken out of the way. Others insist that this hinderer is orderly government, and as long as orderly government prevails these things cannot take place. Some of the early fathers thought the hinderer was the Roman Empire, and that Paul dared not put on paper just what was in his mind lest he expose Christians to the charge of plotting the downfall of the existing private information which he had given to the Thessalonians when he was with them that had to do with this subject. But let us remember that this letter, like every other epistle in the New Testament, was written not for the local believers only to whom it was addressed but for all Christians during the entire dispensation. Therefore verse 6 is addressed to believers everywhere, who ought to be capable of understanding it, if they are at all familiar with their Bibles. ***"Ye know what withholdeth that he [that is, the man of sin] might be revealed in his [own] time."*** Every Christian should be able to answer as he reads these words of scripture, ***"Yes I do know who it is that hindereth the full manifestation of iniquity. There is only one answer possible and that is, of course, The Holy Spirit."***

What Christian is there who would think of any other hindering power in such a connection? In both Testaments this is the very province and work of the Spirit of God. He causeth the wrath of man to praise him and the remainder of wrath he doth restrain (**Psalm 76:10**). ***"When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord***

shall lift up a standard against him "(Isaiah 59:19). He is working in the church at the present time, convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Moreover, His presence in the church continues as long as that church is here, for our Lord promises, ***"When He is come He shall abide with you forever."*** How then will he ever be taken out of the war? This will only occur by the fulfillment of **1 Thessalonians 4**, with the return of the Lord and our being caught up to meet him in the air. This is the tremendous event that will clear the way for that time of trouble from which the church of God is to be kept.

There is one other passage that deals with the rapture. **First Corinthians 15:50-58** says:

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold I shew you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

There are two aspects of the coming kingdom: heavenly and earthly. Both together are called the kingdom of heaven. The saints of this and past ages will not live here on the earth during the kingdom age, but their home city will be the New Jerusalem above. This is called the Kingdom of the Father. "Then shall the righteous shine forth," declared our Lord, ***"in the kingdom of your Father."*** The earthly saints will live here in this world in natural bodies. This is spoken of as the kingdom of the Son of man. The apostle was referring to the heavenly kingdom when He said, ***"Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God: neither doth corruption inherit incorruption."*** All who have part in the heavenly side of the kingdom will have glorified bodies in that day. The manner in which this will be brought about is given us in the verses that follow. ***"We shall not all sleep [that is, we shall not all die], but we shall be changed [or transformed]."*** This will take place in one moment in the briefest possible period of time at the last trump. The sound of that trumpet will end the present dispensation, and the dead will be raised incorruptible and the living changed. This is in exact accord with what we have already seen in **1st Thessalonians 4**.

Some have endeavored to link the last trump of **verse 52** with the seventh trumpet of the book of Revelation. But it should be remembered that the **book of Revelation** was not in existence when the apostle wrote his letters, nor did it come into existence until many years afterward. Therefore, he could not possibly have referred to anything in that book. Furthermore, it is perfectly clear that this last trump is the same as the trump of God in **1 Thessalonians 4**, which is altogether different from the trumpet of an angel. The term seems to be a military one, and refers to a signal used in the Roman army to set the legions in motion. At the first trump tents were struck, at the second trump they fell into line, at the last trump they marched away. We are waiting for the last trump when we will not march nor fly, but will be caught up to be with the Lord in the air, and so we shall be kept from the hour of temptation which is coming on all the earth.

WHICH SAINTS WILL BE IN THE GREAT TRIBULATION?

It is evident from the word of God that certain saints will be found on earth in the days of the great tribulation. Many of these will be called on to suffer martyrdom while others will be preserved through this entire period and will enter into the kingdom to be set up on earth. Because of this, it has naturally been concluded that these are necessarily members of the church, the body of Christ.

Many think of the church as a surname by which the entire family of faith from Adam to the end of the millennium is designated. If one thinks of the church in this manner there can be only one answer to the question. *"Will the church or any part of it go through the great tribulation?"* Certainly many members of the household of faith will have to endure great suffering during that time of trouble. But if one has learned to distinguish clearly from scripture between new birth, common to all children of God in every dispensation, and membership in the body of Christ, which belongs alone to the saints of this present age from Pentecost to the rapture. It should not be difficult to distinguish the saints who will have part in the tribulation from those who will be caught up before it begins. But because many believers are not clear as to this distinction, the point deserves further consideration.

First let it be noted that Old Testament prophecy never refers to this dispensation in which we live (extending from Pentecost to the Lord's coming for His own), save in a most indefinite way (as, for instance, in **Daniel 9:26**). From Moses to Malachi, scripture is mainly occupied with one nation, Israel (**Amos 3:2; Deuteronomy 7:6; Psalm 147:19-20**), and the hope of that nation, namely, the raising up of a prophet (**Deuteronomy 18:15**), priest (**Psalm 110:4; Zechariah 6:13**), and king (**Isaiah 32; Psalm 2:6**). This hope will bring them into everlasting blessing as people (**Psalm 132:11-18; Isaiah 35:10; 51:11; 61:7**), though not until they have been born again (**Ezekiel 36:24-30**). The gentiles will share in that blessing (**Isaiah 56:6; 65:1**), not on the same footing with Israel, but rather in subjection to them (**Isaiah 14:1-3; 60:3-5; 62:2-3**).

Before the ushering in of that day of Jehovah's power and Messiah's glory the prophets predicted the rejection of the looked-for Redeemer by Israel to whom He came (**Isaiah 53**). In consequence Israel is set aside by God (**Zechariah 7:13-14**), while the rejected Messiah takes His place in the heavens on Jehovah's throne (**Psalm 110:1**), which He will occupy until the future repentance of the people (**Hosea 5:15**). This setting aside of Israel is not final, as **Jeremiah 30-31** declare. But before their restoration to divine favor and the land of Palestine, the Israelites must pass through a short period of unequalled persecution and chastisement, called *"the time of Jacob's trouble"* (**Jeremiah 30:7**). At the close of this time they will be ready to acknowledge the crucified one as their Lord, and will *"mourn for Him as one mourning for his only son"* (**Zechariah 12:10-14; 13:6-7**). In the darkest hour of their sorrow, when Jerusalem is surrounded by armies and they are in dire distress, He will appear as their Deliverer and the destroyer of their enemies, after which the tabernacle of David will be raised up and the reign of righteousness ushered in (**Zechariah 14; Amos 9:8-15**).

In the New Testament we find much new information introduced, without which the present working of the Spirit of God in the world would be inexplicable. In **Romans 11** we are told that upon the breaking off of the natural branches (Israel) from the tree of promise, wild branches (Gentiles) are put in their place. In other words, Israel's rejection has made way for unforetold grace to be shown to the nations, though Old Testament prophecy of blessing to the heathen can be quoted as proof that such grace is not in

opposition to their final blessing. However, this special work among the gentiles is not to go on forever, for if these do not continue in divine goodness, they too shall be cut off and the natural branches grafted in again.

God is doing a work now that is not mentioned in the Jewish oracles, during the time that His earthly people are lo-ammi ("*not my people*," Hosea 1:9), or unacknowledged by Him, "*Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in*" (Romans 11:25). This is one of the "*mysteries*", one of the secret things (Deuteronomy 29:29) that has until now been unrevealed. The Lord Jesus confirms this (from the political side) in his prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, the long period of desolation and gentile supremacy following it, and the end that occurs with his personal appearing. Luke 21:24 records: "*Jerusalem shall be trodden of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.*"

This passage is related to Daniel 9, where we see the prophecy of the seventy weeks. Let us briefly consider the main points. From the course of time, seventy weeks of years, or 490 years, are "*determined*," or "*cut off*," and given to Daniel's people, or the Jewish nation. Before this period of time expires six important events will have taken place:

1. Transgression will be finished;
2. An end will be made of sins;
3. Atonement (rather than reconciliation) will be made for iniquity;
4. Everlasting righteousness will be brought in;
5. Vision and prophecy will be sealed up, or fulfilled;
6. And the most holy, or holy of holies, of the millennial temple at Jerusalem will be anointed (see Ezekiel 40-48).

The seventy weeks are divided into three unequal periods. The first is seven weeks, or forty-nine years. The second is sixty-two weeks, or 434 years. The third is one week, or seven years. During the first seven weeks, or "*the strait times*", the city and wall of Jerusalem were to be rebuilt. The date from which to count is found in Nehemiah 2, when a "*commandment went forth to restore and build Jerusalem.*" The sixty-two weeks seem to have immediately followed, and ended in the coming of Messiah. After the conclusion of this period He was cut off and had nothing, but atonement was made. Then comes the present long interval of Jerusalem's treading down. The city is destroyed, as our Lord foretold also, and "*even unto the end shall be war*," until one arises who confirms a covenant with the Jews for the last final week. Clearly, then, this week is still future. The prophetic clock stopped at Calvary; it will not start again until "*the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.*"

The present is a timeless epoch, parenthetically introduced between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week, in which God is taking out from among the gentiles a people for His name (Acts 15:14). He has utterly given up the Jew, but both Jew and gentile stand on equal footing: "*There is no difference: For all have sinned*" (Romans 3:22-23). Both are saved through faith in Christ, and all such are made members of the one body, the church. By the Holy Ghost both are united to the Lord Jesus Christ as head in heaven. (See Romans 16:25-28; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4; Colossians 1:24-29). This began with the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2; 1 Corinthians 12:13). It will be completed at the coming of the Lord when He calls His church to be forever with Himself, an event which may take place at any moment (1st Thessalonians 4:15-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54; 2 Thessalonians 2:1).

Then the long-delayed seventieth week will begin to run its course. At its conclusion Daniel's prophecy (as all other millennial prophecies) will be entirely fulfilled. Atonement was made for iniquity after the expiration of the sixty-ninth week. Everlasting righteousness will be brought in at the end of the seventieth. This brief period will be one of judgment. It will include judgment on apostate Christendom, on Israel, and on the nations at large. It is to be the awful result of the rejection of the Prince of Peace. **Revelation 4-19** is occupied entirely with its solemn events. The saints of all prior dispensations, as well as the church, are seen enthroned in heaven as the twenty-four elders who have been redeemed with the blood of the lamb (**Revelation 5**) at the beginning of the week. They ride forth as the *"armies of heaven"* with *"the Word of God"* at His glorious appearing at the end.

The last three-and-one-half years will be the time when Israel shall receive *"of the Lord's hand double for all her sins"* (**Isaiah 40:2**), the *"time of Jacob's trouble"* spoken of in **Jeremiah 30:7** and **Daniel 12:1**, and the *"great tribulation"* of **Matthew 24** and **Revelation 7:14**. The covenant breaking prince of **Daniel 9** is the beast, the head of the Roman Empire, who makes a league with the willful king of **Revelation 11:36-39**. He is the antichrist of prophecy (**1 John 2:18**), the idol shepherd of **Zechariah 11:15-17**, who will *"come in his own name,"* as foretold by the Lord Jesus in **John 5:43**, and will be received by the majority of the Jews as messiah, but who will become the cruel persecutor of a faithful company designated as *"the remnant"* (**Isaiah 11:11**; **Ezekiel 6:8**; **Revelation 12:17**).

In **Revelation 7** we read of 144,000 out of all the tribes of Israel and a numberless white-robed multitude of spared gentiles who will follow the Lamb wherever He goes. They are said to have come up out of the great tribulation and to have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Many take it for granted that this is a heavenly company, and one is not surprised at that, for the language used is so nearly like that which we find later on in connection with the saints in the new Jerusalem. But a careful comparison of this chapter with a part of **Isaiah 49** makes it clear that this great multitude represents the nucleus of the kingdom to be set up in this world at the time when our Lord returns and the days of heaven prevail on the earth. In other words, it refers to heavenly conditions in this world. In **Isaiah 49:8-13**, we read:

"Thus saith the Lord. In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee; and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages. That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places. They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them; for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them. And I will make all my mountains a way, and my highways shall be exalted. Behold, these shall come from far; and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim. Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains; for the Lord hath comforted His people, and will have mercy upon His afflicted."

There is no question here of resurrection or the peopling of the heavenly Jerusalem. This entire prophecy has to do with the resurrection of Israel and the blessing of the gentiles through them of the earth in a coming day. The language of **verse 10** is almost identical with that of **Revelation 7:16**. Who then are these saints?

First we must consider the 144,000. There has been speculation regarding this company. Some see them a picture of what they call a firstfruits rapture, linking this passage with Revelation 14, where 144,000 are seen standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion. The current teaching states that a select group of believers will be raptured before the great tribulation, while the rest will have to pass through it. The 144,000 are supposed to represent this select group. The great multitude, the majority of the church, will be purified in the fires of the great tribulation. But scripture knows nothing of any such selective rapture. The word of God is perfectly plain. Consider these texts from the Bible: ***"Christ the firstfruits, afterward they that are Christ's at His coming." "We which are alive and remain shall be caught up together."*** There is no hint of any division in the church of God, the body of Christ. All are saved by grace, all are alike made ***"meet to be partakers of the of the inheritance of the saints in light."*** The rapture is never presented as reward for special devotedness, but is preliminary to the judgment seat of Christ, where we shall all stand to receive our rewards. We will be in a glorified body when we appear at that great tribunal. This could not be true if only a special group were raptured before the tribulation.

It is sad to observe the way various sects and systems seek to identify themselves with the 144,000. According to the Seventh-day Adventists, these are those who keep the commandments perfectly. The Russellites insist that they are a special class of overcomers who will be exalted to the divine nature, whereas others will be saved on a lower plane. Various Pentecostal groups declare that they are those who have been baptized with the Spirit and speak in tongues, or are characterized by other remarkable gifts.

But what are the facts? First we have the vision (**Revelation 7:1- 3**), and then the interpretation (**7:4**). The 144,000 are out of all tribes of the children of Israel and represent that remnant which will turn to the Lord after the church has been caught up, in accordance with **Romans 11:23: *"Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in."*** In the book of Daniel, and in many parts of prophetic scripture, we find this remnant distinguished from the mass. They are the wise who understand. They are the gleanings in the day of Jehovah's wrath, who will be recognized by Him as His own. They are sealed for preservation in view of the coming kingdom, before the dreadful storm of the great tribulation is permitted to break on the earth. In Revelation 14 we see them as a victorious company, safely emerged from that storm, having formed what we might call the bodyguard of the Lamb, when He returns to mount Zion. It is evident that they will be a witnessing company and will carry the gospel of the kingdom to millions who have never heard and rejected the message of grace. As a result of their testimony, we see the great multitude of gentiles brought to a knowledge of Christ and cleansed by His precious blood.

For I know their works and their thoughts; it shall come, that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come, and see my glory. And I will set a sign among them, and I will send those that escape of them into the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, that draw thee bow, to Tubal, and Javan, to the isles afar off, that have not heard my fame, neither have seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the Gentiles. And they shall bring all your brethren for an offering unto the Lord out of all nations upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon swift beasts, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, saith the Lord, as the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the Lord. And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith the Lord (**Isaiah 66:18-21**).

Here we have God dealing in grace with Israel and the gentile nations during the time of the great tribulation and just before He sets up His glorious kingdom here on earth.

We are told in **Daniel 12:3**,

"And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."

This has to do with their testimony in the time of trouble yet to come, but Daniel has told us,

"At that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book."

The hour of their darkest trouble and deepest sorrow will result in the elect among them returning to the Lord. The 144,000 of **Revelation 7** are those who will say, ***"Come, and let us return unto the Lord; for He hath torn, and He will heal us; He hath smitten, and He will bind us up"*** (**Hosea 6:1**). Zion's sore travail shall result in a great bringing forth of children, as predicted in **Micah 5:3** and **Isaiah 66:8**.

"Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? or shall a nation be born at once? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children."

The **"blindness in part"** is to be done away, the **"fullness of the Gentiles"** having come in, as shown also in **Hosea 3:4-5**:

"For the children of Israel shall abide many days without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without an image, and without an ephod, and without teraphim: Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the Lord their God, and David their King; and shall fear the Lord and His goodness in the latter days."

This is true not of the nation as a whole (see **Zechariah 13:8-9**; **Isaiah 24:13**; also **Ezekiel 20:31-44**) but of the remnant. The mass will be destroyed for their apostasy. The remnant will be acknowledged as the nation, and ***"so all Israel shall be saved"*** (**Romans 11:26**). To be of the sons of Jacob will not ensure an opportunity of grace. None who refuse the truth now, whether Jew or gentile, can be saved then.

In **Matthew 25**, we have the judgment of the living nations at the Lord's return. This is to be distinguished from the judgment of the great white throne. The former is premillennial, the latter postmillennial. We read:

"When the Son of man shall come in His glory and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory, and before Him shall be gathered all nations."

Notice there is no word of people here being raised from the dead, as at the final judgment. But we see the living nations gathered before him, and a separation is made according to the treatment afforded those whom the Lord calls ***"my brethren"***. Linking this with the passages we have already considered, it would seem to be clear that the ***"brethren"*** here referred to are His brethren after the flesh, the remnant of Israel. Those who enter into the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world

are the gentiles who received these brethren and heeded their message. These are the ones who inherit the millennial kingdom.

Those who are martyred under the beast and the anti-Christ in that day will be raised from the dead when the Lord descends to take the kingdom, and will thus form the last cohort of the first resurrection. Notice the order indicated in **Revelation 20:4-6**. First, John says, *"I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them."* These are undoubtedly identified with the saints who are raised at the Rapture before the Tribulation. Then John mentions another class...

"And I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands, and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years."

These are the martyrs of the tribulation period. They have their part in the heavenly side of the kingdom. As to the unsaved, we are told in **verse 5**. *"But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection."* **Verse 6** includes the entire company who have part in the various cohorts of the first resurrection. *"Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection; on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years."*

It is plain then that there will be saints on the earth during the great tribulation, but they are not members of the body of Christ, as that body is now constituted by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They will be individual believers, as in Old Testament times, and will through grace be enabled to witness for Christ in that day of great distress. They will share in the kingdom and enjoy the blessing of the Lord in a wonderful way, but they are not included in the body of Christ that occupies a distinct place through all the ages to come.

WHAT IS OUR BLESSED HOPE?

As we thoughtfully read the words of our Lord Jesus recorded in the early verses of John 14 and as we consider the teaching given in the Pauline epistles in regard to the hope of the church, it becomes increasingly evident that there is not the least hint that believers of this dispensation were to look forward to a long series of events preceding the return of the Lord Jesus to raise the dead in Christ and change the living and take them to Himself in the Father's house. This blessed hope is always presented as imminent, which it could not be if one had to suppose that the destruction and revival of the Roman empire, the rise of the antichrist, and the great tribulation, must precede that glorious event. Yet there are other scriptures that distinctly show, as we have seen, that there will be saints on the earth when these conditions prevail. But I trust it has already been made clear that they will not belong to the church, the body of Christ.

There are in fact two distinct stages of our Lord's return presented in the New Testament. He is coming for His saints; this is the rapture that precedes the great tribulation. And He is going to be manifested with all His saints when he descends to exercise judgment on those who have persisted in rejecting His grace; this is when He will establish His glorious kingdom to reign in righteousness over this world. In other words, while the Old Testament and the four gospels, together with other scriptures,

plainly predict Christ's second coming to establish His kingdom on this earth, it is part of the mystery hidden from past ages that when He comes He will have with Him a bride to share His throne, as well as a host of other redeemed saints from all past dispensations in His train. This is looked on as a visionary interpretation by many, and the attempt has been made again and again to show that this view, which is often called the futurist theory, was originated by Spanish Jesuits in order to turn away opprobrium from Rome. But the fact of the matter is that the Jesuit writers in question, Alchzar and Ribera, simply set forth what was taught with more or less clearness by some of the church fathers in the first three centuries of the Christian era, and was lost sight of later.

Others again have tried to put the stigma of demonism on the precious truth that the Lord may return at any time to take His saints to be with Himself preceding the great tribulation, endeavouring to link this with certain theories taught by the late Edward Irving and his followers in the early part of the nineteenth century. But anyone at all acquainted with Irving's teaching can see how truly false this is. From the time when long-neglected prophetic truth came again into prominence there was a great deal of confusion regarding the two aspects of the Lord's return mentioned above. But eminent Bible teachers who weighed all the scriptures carefully and prayerfully before God were led to see the distinction between the church as the body of Christ and the saints of a coming age. These saints would be witnesses for the Lord in the time of the tribulation and would share with Him in the manifested kingdom. The more carefully these views have been examined by men of God dependent on the teaching of the Holy Spirit through the word, the more they have been seen to be distinctly in harmony with divine revelation.

In recent years, particularly following World War I, there has been a recrudescence of posttribulationism, brought about largely by the fact that so many stirring events have taken place which seem to foreshadow the actual conditions that will prevail during the time of Jacob's trouble. Already the Roman empire seems in process of revival. The rise of dictatorship gives us to understand how readily the great world ruler of the coming day will forge his way to the front and be acclaimed as the very representative of God himself. The return of thousands of Jews to Palestine, involving the rehabilitation of that land, is certainly preparing the way for the very events depicted in the prophets and by our Lord Himself, which are to take place in the last days.

All of these things and many others that might be added, seem to have swept some dear brethren away from their moorings. Losing sight of that blessed Hope, they are now fixing their attention on events, rather than on the Person Who is coming. The effect of this is not a healthy thing. It results in occupying the heart and mind with earthly things instead of with the coming Saviour. It has led many to think that perhaps we are entering even now into the great tribulation - perhaps we are actually through the greater part of it and are just waiting for the revelation of the antichrist and then the Lord's actual descent to the Mount of Olives and the establishment of the kingdom.

But the very fact that we see conditions shaping themselves for tribulation times should only lead us to realize the nearness of our hope. At any moment now the Lord may descend from heaven to raise the dead and change the living, and then will come the dark days predicted in both Testaments for apostate Israel and apostate Christendom.

Another view that has clouded the faith of many is what is commonly known as the partial or firstfruits rapture. This, however, is in plain contradiction to the testimony of the Holy Spirit given through the apostle Paul and our blessed Lord Himself. The Saviour

made no distinction among His heavenly people when he said, ***"If I go...I will come again and receive you unto Myself."*** He had just foretold the defection of Peter, but He did not even hint that unless Peter is restored he will have no part in the heavenly Father's house. In fact, our Lord addressed Himself particularly to Peter when He said, ***"Let not your heart be troubled."*** He of course had made provision for the restoration of the soul of his disciples, as He does for all of us; but He gave no suggestion that any would be left behind when He would return for His own. In the epistles the rapture is seen to be all-embracing. We read: ***"They that are Christ's at His coming."***

We do not read that they are eminently faithful, nor that they speak with tongues, but simply that ***"they that are Christ's."*** And again, in 1 Thessalonians, we have the statement, ***"We which are alive and remain shall be caught up together."*** There are no distinctions made between mature and immature Christians in these words. If other scriptures are cited which seem to indicate that some will not be ready when the Lord comes, a careful examination of the context will show that in each instance the reference is to the coming of the Son of man at the end of the great tribulation, and not to the descent of the Lord to the aid to receive the saints of this dispensation and past ages to be with Himself in the Father's house.

Therefore it may be confidently affirmed that neither post-tribulationism nor partial rapture theories are taught in the word of God. It seems perfectly evident that the blessed Hope is intended to be the daily expectation of the believers, which could not be if certain events had to take place before its fulfillment.

Moreover, if I put anything in my thinking between the present moment and the return of the Lord, I am losing what is of infinite value in connection with my personal walk and Christian experience. ***"Every man that hath this Hope in him purifieth himself even as he is pure."*** I know of nothing that is so effectual in controlling the heart and mind of the believer, so that his one aim and object will be to walk in holy separation to the Lord Himself, as the thought that at any moment He Who has redeemed us may return and take us to the Father's house. One may hold certain intellectual views of the second coming of Christ, even the view of the pretribulation rapture, and not be practically sanctified thereby. But if this hope holds me, it cannot but result in increased personal piety.

Then too we need to remember that it is at the return of the Lord for His saints that He will go over our record as servants when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ. At that time, we are to be rewarded according to the deeds done in the body, and our place in the coming kingdom indicated. It is then that the crowns of reward are to be distributed, and in this connection it is significant to note that in the book of Revelation, we see the twenty-four elders crowned and enthroned around the central throne of God and of the Lamb (**Revelation 4 and 5**), before the solemn judgments begin to fall on the earth. Almost all futurist interpreters are agreed that in **chapters 6-19 of Revelation**, we have the great tribulation period. It is then that the wrath of the Lamb and the wrath of God will be poured on the habitable earth, and Satan will be cast down from the heavenlies, having great wrath, knowing that his time is short.

These are the circumstances of the great tribulation. We are looking for Christ as our deliverer from the wrath to come. Whatever view we may take of the symbolic elders, whether we think of them as twenty-four individuals, or as representing the entire heavenly priesthood, which to me is clearly the true interpretation, there is this to bear in mind; they are seen crowned in heaven before the judgments begin. Consider these

facts: the tribulation period does not begin until the Lamb receives the seven-sealed book and breaks the seals. But the Lamb does not receive the book until crowned saints are seen in heaven. No saints have yet received their crowns, nor will there be crowned saints in heaven until the Judgment Seat of Christ is past. The apostle Paul declares definitely that the crown of righteousness will be given to him and to all who love Christ's appearing in that day; this is the day of the manifestation following our Lord's return for His saints. Therefore it seems plainly evident that the great tribulation cannot possibly begin until after the rapture of the church.

There is much more that might be said, but I leave the matter here, commending the entire subject to the spiritual judgment of the people of God, feeling assured that the more carefully this matter is weighed, the clearer it will be that the church, the body of Christ, is not to look forward to a time when the wrath of God will be poured out on this world, but is to live in daily expectation of the Lord's return to take us to be with Himself before the time of grief begins.

May it be our privilege to search the scriptures daily concerning the truth of these things, and to live in the power of that blessed Hope.

Praise God for our blessed Hope, Jesus Christ.

[[Dr. Harry Ironside](#) (1876-1951), a godly Fundamentalist author and teacher for many years, served as pastor of Chicago's Moody Memorial Church from 1930-1948]

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